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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1275
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RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
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SUBJECT: MEMBERS OF UNREGISTERED RELIGIOUS GROUPS ARRESTED
IN MENDEFERA

¶1. During the second week of November, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) orchestrated a large scale campaign to arrest members of the unregistered religious groups in Mendefera, in the heart of the predominantly-Christian central highlands, about 1 hour from Asmara. Initial reports claimed the GSE arrested over 150 protestant Christians from the Church of Living God, Kaile Hiwot and other churches. Later reports indicate the number may be as high as 400. Over a period of several days, GSE officials believed to be part of the GSE domestic intelligence/national security office, appeared at the homes of individuals and took them to a detention facility around Mendefera. There were reports that the GSE later moved some individuals to a national security operated facility in Dekemhare, approximately 30 kilometers from Mendefera.

¶2. Post believes that many of those arrested remain in detention with only meager food rations and with some prevented from receiving visits from family and friends. Post has received reports that some of those arrested were being asked to renounce their allegiance and religious beliefs and sign sworn statements announcing their willingness to abandon their protestant Church and return to the Eritrean Orthodox Church. In addition the GSE separated at least 15 new mothers from their breast-feeding infants, apparently in hope that this separation would pressure the women to renounce their beliefs more quickly. In response to this pressure, church members rapidly convened other breast-feeding mothers to provide care for the infants. Reportedly these 15 mothers remain incarcerated.

¶3. Comment: The GSE recognizes only four "authorized" religious communities and continues to persecute citizens who are members of other religious groups. In the past, most arrests occurred when church members gathered for small bible study groups or worship. We are concerned that the targeting of individuals in their homes on such a large scale may signal the beginning of a new campaign to threaten and frighten members of unregistered religious groups. And although attempts at forced recantations following arrest have been standard procedure the separation of nursing mothers from their children seems to mark a new low for the GSE (especially in a country with no such thing as infant formula). We are aware of no particular development that may have sparked this latest crackdown but it seems consistent

with a range of GSE actions directed against those who refuse to conform to GSE norms whether on religion, civic duty (including national service), or political orthodoxy. In the end, what the GSE seems to fear most is independent thought in any form and, the gathering together of individuals who believe in something other than the GSE and the struggle, appears to be construed by the GSE as a "threat" to be mitigated firmly and quickly. End Comment.

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